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ABSTRACT

In view of research findings that unskilled writers are rule-based rather than context-based in revision of their written work, a study was conducted of the stage between writing a rough draft and the teacher conference to determine how inexperienced writers would articulate their performance and evaluate their strategies for revision. An open-ended preconference form was designed and was completed by students in regular and remedial college composition classes. Questions on the form included the following: (1) What do you like best about your essay? (2) What is your goal in this paper? (3) What do you want the reader to do or think in each paragraph? (4a) List the specific strategies you used and relate them to what you wish the reader to do or think; and (4b) list the questions or problems that you have in each paragraph. Results indicated that better writers could use and articulate more strategies than could poorer writers; on 4a, poorer writers were unable to articulate the hierarchy or order of their ideas; and better writers performed better on 4b. This form has since proved very effective as a teaching tool, since it models the attitudes and behaviors expected of good writers. (DF)

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SELF-ASSESSING ABILITIES OF FRESHMAN WRITERS

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SELF-ASSESSING ABILITIES OF FRESHMAN WRITERS

Jane A. Telleen

Last summer Richard Beach and I undertook a study of the self-assessing abilities of remedial writers because we had read several thought-provoking research reports on the editing and revising processes of unskilled writers. Sharon Pianko (RTE, Feb 1979) found that "the ability to reflect on what is being written" separates traditional from remedial writers. Nancy Sommers (DissAbInt 1979, 39, 5374A) found that student writers had no formal theory of revision and few ways to revise, compared with the formal techniques and multiple strategies used by experienced writers. Sondra Perl (RTE, Dec 1979, but earlier at CCCC session, April 1979) similarly found that remedial writers employ an error-hunting rather than a reflexive, or conceptual, method of editing their work.

These studies make clear what most of us suspected earlier, that the ability to assess and revise one's own work is a crucial one, and that experienced writers have a complex, varied, reflexive, and (when pressed for explanation) highly conscious writing routine. In the early stages they can forget about surface features while they think about ideas and organization. They can describe the audience they're trying to attract or convince, and they see their task as that of making a series of choices, using strategies based on their image of that audience. They don't see their task as that of conforming to a series of rules.

On the other hand, remedial or unskilled writers are rule-bound, in contrast to these experienced writers, spending too little time in the prewriting/conceptualizing/revising process and too much time worrying about grammar and sentences that "sound funny." Some researchers have described them as

"egocentric" (Perl, p.332); that is, they can't distance themselves from their writing, and they assume their audience shares their knowledge and assumptions about a topic.

But this is a problematic term--"egocentric" unnecessarily suggests "narcissistic", as though their personalities are malfunctioning. The cognitive psychologist William Perry describes it less negatively: our students, especially the remedial ones, tend to be "dualists." They view the instructor as Knower of Truth, whose role is to give knowledge to the passive student, whose role in turn is to learn (that is, memorize) the answers. For them, writing is learning rules. Furthermore, they have few options or strategies at their disposal. When they look at their own drafts, they have a limited number of things to look for--just as I, when my car won't start, can lift up the hood and check two or three things, but can't think of anything else to do if these things don't work. Neither I nor my unskilled writers can think of other options.

Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, in a recent CCC article on this topic, state the question clearly:

> Would the performance of poor writers change if they too had a richer sense of what they were trying to do as they wrote, or if they had more of the goals for affecting the reader which were so stimulating to the good writers? (CCC, 13,4,p.30.)

Flower and Hayes think the writing process should be more context-based than rule-based. Perry's development theory likewise suggests that we should be helping them move gradually from dualist to what he calls "contextual relativism," where they

consider their audience (or context) and learn to see writing as making a series of choices among complex alternatives.

Richard Beach and I wanted to explore this approach, not at the initial prewriting stage, but at an intermediate, self-evaluation stage. We recognized, of course, that writing is a recursive process--that prewriting kinds of activities can and do occur throughout the many drafting stages. But we wanted to "catch" the students after they wrote a rough draft and before they had a conference with teacher or peers, to see how well they could articulate what they had done so far on their papers, and how well they could evaluate what they had left to do.

In an earlier study, Rick Beach had found out that those students who revised extensively were much better at evaluating their own work than were the non-revisers. They revisers paid much more attention to goals and audience and organization; the non-revisers were concerned with grammar. The problem with that study, however, was that the students were asked to evaluate their work merely by using a general checklist:

I need most work on organization.

I need least work on sentence structure.

I need to think about my ideas more.

and so on. We couldn't get at more specific strategies or intentions.

So we devised a more open-ended pre-conference form, which each student filled out and turned in along with her rough draft before the group conference. By using these forms, we hoped to keep track of and classify the kinds of statements people made about their work, so we could see how often they thought about

their audience and their goals. We wanted to explore more minute differences among college freshman writers, especially between remedial and regular writers.

Our project began with a small (Comp 0001) remedial class last summer: we introduced them to the vocabulary and concepts of goal and audience-oriented writing, and talked about strategies and options. We tried to get them to move from strictly grammar-concerned attitudes to more conceptual approaches, and to get them to do their paper-writing in stages. We also asked them to fill out pre-conference forms.

Our experience with the forms was, quite honestly, fairly disastrous, because they simply did not fill them out--or if they did, used only a few general words. We decided to run the same project again with regular (Comp 1001) classes last fall, because we though maybe we simply had an unworkable form or procedure. So Sara Miller and I each taught one "experimental" section of Comp 1001--where pre-conference forms and audience/strategy vocabulary were very much a part of classwork--and one "control" section, where students only filled out the forms for the first and last (fourth) papers, and where discussion of goals related to audience was not particularly emphasized. Finally, this winter quarter, I taught another section of remedial composition, again using the forms and the audience/strategy approach.

Question #1 on the form was, "What do you like best about your essay?" We did not code responses to this. Questions #2 and #3 were about topic and audience:

2. What is your goal in this paper? That is, what are you trying to say or show to the reader?

3. What do you want the reader to do or think?

We coded responses in terms of whether they had defined their topic and audience well, somewhat, or poorly. We hoped to discover the relationship between these two questions and questions 4a and 4b, which were as follows:

> Number your paragraphs or, if you don't yet have paragraphs, divide your paper into parts by putting a slash (/) at the places where you think you're beginning a new idea. Then re-read the paper as if you were someone else reading it for the first time. a) In each paragraph, describe (list) what you did (the specific strategies you used. When you used <u>each</u> strategy, what did you want your reader to do or think? b) Then, in each paragraph or part, list the questions or problems that you have--places where you got confused, need more information, etc.

In assessing 4a and 4b, we coded the responses into three categories. First were "not useful" statements: mere summaries of content (such as "here I talk about car salesmen), or affect (such as "it sounds funny") or grammar. By choosing to ignore grammar and sentence-structure temporarily, we are not suggesting that it is not important--some writers may indeed be ready to pay attention to surface features. Moreover, we recognize that statements such as "it sounds funny" often accurately point out problem places. But we suspected (correctly) that most students were better off being encouraged to forget about surface for awhile, and that merely affective responses were not useful

self-assessments.

Second, we coded references to audience: their imagined reader's prior knowledge of the subject, interest in it, emotional response, comprehension. Third were what we called "useful" responses, or strategies: identifying a thesis, using transitions, recognizing hierarchy and order and relative emphasis of points, backgrounding, defining, contrasting and comparing, and supporting with reasons and examples.

In gathering this data, we discovered some very interesting things about the students, but more importantly (and perhaps unfortunately for our descriptive study), we discovered that the pre-conference form was an excellent teaching tool. The following examples show how using the forms has helped us move the students--even the remedial ones--toward a more sensible option-taking approach toward writing.

We expected the obvious: that the better writers would use and be able to articulate more strategies than poorer writers. We also expected that better writers would do well on 4b. But we found that the important distinction between good and poor writers was how well they did on 4a, not 4b. The poor writers simply summarized the contents time after time. Their only sense of hierarchy or order consisted of labelling the first and last paragraphs as Introduction and Conclusion. Their 4b responses were usually concerned with surface problems or vaguely formulated.

4a	1. Introduction	1. Thesis not clear.
	2. Content summary	2. Needs better words.
	3. Content summary	3. Needs more.
	4. Content summary	4. Another example.
	5. Conclusion	5. I hate it.

The good writers, in contrast, by using the form, thinking of strategies and audience, saw that each paragraph had multiple uses. That is, they could not only summarize contents, but also show those contents as part of a hierarchical structure, indicate that the paragraph was a transition from one point to the next, and state how important the paragraph was to the whole argument. Also, they could more often state what the effect on the reader was intended to be.

At first we only intended to use the form as one more piece of data. But we found our "subjects" wouldn't let us do that. We found we could and had to use the form as a teaching tool, because they wanted to.

For some students, such as Mike, the process of doing the forms showed them what they were doing wrong, or ignoring. For the essay used in this example, Mike, Amy and Dan were to write an article which Ms. magazine might want to print--they had to know their audience, and write for it. (In the previous essay assignment they had analyzed the Ms. audience.) Mike stated his goal clearly, but he didn't realize until the fourth paragraph that he was forgetting his audience and goal.

?2-3 To inform the readers about women in architecture or possibly to persuade a few to enter the field; readers should know that women are becoming a part of architecture.

?4 (by paragraph):

1. This is my introduction. Here I give a general statement about what architecture was. Told about what an architect does and about women in the field.
2. What an architect does with the physical part of the job.
3. The social part of the job.
4. Here I told about women coming into the field. (I think I should probably expand this idea into 2 or 3 paragraphs. If I were to relate more things about what women are accomplishing in architecture, it would probably interest the reader more.)

5. The study done on women architects is right to the point.
6. My conclusion.
In general, all paragraphs have topic sentences, but I don't think I have a thesis statement. I have to revise my paper to interest my audience. I didn't really keep them in mind when writing this. I just like architecture and wanted to write about it.

It seems to have only gradually dawned on Mike what his problem was. But filling out the form seems to have caused the diagnosis. When he came to the group conference, he hardly needed it. He knew exactly what he needed to do.

Another good writer, Amy, didn't spot her problem directly, but her work on the form made it easy for me to show her that she "knew" what was wrong. Her goal is clear, and appropriate for a Ms. audience:

I'm trying to state the basics of car buying and add the idea of how women can become victims. I want the reader to think that she can learn about car buying and see the biases of car salesmen.

Notice that in each paragraph she mentions women (her audience) somehow, except for in paragraphs 3 and 7. These are precisely the problem paragraphs, and she knows it, as I have indicated in parentheses (her 4b responses). Somehow they don't belong because they don't keep her audience topic clearly in mind. They flag for a moment--become too general.

4a and 4b (by paragraph):
1. I come on strong with the problems a "know-nothing" female has when buying a car. I also give her hope by suggesting she learn about cars.
2. I state the protections one must take in this market and emphasize discrimination against females.
3. Here I specifically list questions a buyer faces and suggest she answer them before she goes to buy a car.
4. This paragraph is a short little nothing that fills in between choosing a category and actually looking at cars. (I suppose this could be lengthened and explained.)
5. Here I'm emphasizing the questioning process--the reader needs to check everything out.
6. Here I state a woman's disadvantage.

7. Here I add other considerations in owning a car. (This paragraph could come earlier in the paper? I'm not quite sure what to do with it.)

All I had to do was point out this lack of relationship between her stated purpose and the content of the paragraphs, and she was off and running. She could decide whether each paragraph belonged, and why.

This looks pretty slick so far, and I suppose you're saying, "But these students aren't remedial. What about them?" Look at Dan's response to the same assignment. His goal is much less clear. Unlike Mike and Amy, Dan doesn't consider that he might be able to convince his audience to do something--to enter the trades. Notice he wants to present himself as "respecting it," because he has had personal experience working with women in carpentry.

To let the reader be aware of the growing popularity of women doing trades. I want the reader to understand that more and more women are interested in this field and that the writer respects it.

But he can't label or describe that personal experience in more concrete terms--he doesn't know exactly what the personal experience illustrates.

4a and 4b (by paragraph):
1. Introduction
2. My own personal experience and what I've seen.
3. Popularity among media.
4. My own opinion about it.
5. In general, how women trade workers would benefit the country if there was a shortage of men.

To Dan, his personal experience has only that label, and that is sufficient. In our conference we worked on connecting that experience to the goal of the paper.

Jim was a remedial student who couldn't even answer the first question. This, of course, indicated a conceptual approach that consisted entirely of following directions and rules. He is extremely uncomfortable with the "choice of options" approach. His questions are constantly phrased in terms of "what you want." Jim is unusual; most students answered question 1--some with an ironic "I like the look of a typed paper." Regular writers occasionally gave inadequate responses to questions 2 and 3, but remedial students did this more than regular students. This indicated that they were still in the early prewriting stages--perhaps unable to proceed through them. Their comments in 2 and 3 were as follows: child abuse

to show my experience
the nursing home where I work at

Sometimes they could answer 2 and 3 clearly, but could not see that their paper had parts, so they left 4a and 4b blank.

At first it appeared to us that the poorer students just described were not ready for the form--that we were asking them to do something which is beyond them. And, in fact, the "whole-paper" approach essentially contradicts the usual approach, which is the rather methodical building from sentences to paragraphs in the "follow the pattern" style. But consider, for a moment, what seems to have happened in the class itself. We found that we could use the form to diagnose and deal with even these severely blocked prewriting stages. In a sense, what we are doing by asking them to fill out the pre-conference form is teaching them not pattern (which they rarely find in anyone's

writing), but strategy. That is, we teach them ways to approach a topic systematically, and give them a vocabulary for articulating their goals and problems. We constantly make them answer the question, "Why am I doing this here?" They have discovered that writing is centered around making choices based on their goal and audience, and by organizing and developing accordingly. According to all the research cited at the beginning of this essay, this is exactly what we should be doing.

Those who are still at the prewriting stage with their topic know it. One glance at Marty's form, where #2 is filled in "the nursing home where I work," and the teacher knows that the messy sentences and lack of paragraphs are a mere symptom of a general lack of purpose. Directed questioning in an individual conference can get Marty to articulate her reason for writing, and then she can fill in the form--more of it, at least--and do the paper much more easily. Without the form, she would have had to stare at her actual draft, constantly looking at surface while trying to concentrate on deep structure, on abstraction. With the form, she can discuss her paper at one remove, minus all the surface features that she tends to fixate upon.

Classwork can be also related directly to the use of the pre-conference form. We use the forms to analyze both good drafts--movie and play reviews, editorials, syndicated columns--and bad drafts to figure out the writers' purpose, audience, major points, and strategies, and then relate them to the students' own work. These class sessions are lively because they love "playing psychologist," trying to figure out what the writer's intentions are. More importantly, they see how essays can be put together and why--there's not a rule, but strategies behind them. There

seems to be less distance between their writing and that of "good writers."

This approach, in short, seems to model the attitudes as well as the behaviors that we see in good writers. Many self-assessment forms do not. True, they ask students to look at their papers abstractly, but they ask students to "count the number of. . ." something. Remedial students, especially, are used to counting things--their errors. The "count 'em" form, we believe, draws attention away from both the recursive process of writing and from the rhetorical strategies and goals, so students get a false idea of what writing is all about.

Last and most important, filling out the open-ended form throws back on the student the responsibility for describing her own work, and insists on at least minimal distancing from it. Students have to explain instead of simply waiting to respond passively to the teacher's assessment of what they need to correct on their paper. They have to manipulate, figure out options, and choose among them. But they also see that they have the power to manipulate, and find that their reasons for doing things make sense, even to the teacher--not because they're following rules, but because they're being deliberate. It also aids in their development progress by slowly forcing them out of the dualistic mode. They are forced to assume a reader's perspective .

Work with this form hasn't been perfect, of course: we only slowly discovered how useful it was as a teaching tool. There are still adjustments to be made. I've found, for instance, that remedial students do better with intensive heuristics modelling (in an individual conference) before they worry about the form.

Perhaps the final comment needing to be made is about student responses and evaluations at the end of the quarter. For some

reason, more students came up voluntarily to state that not only had they learned a great deal, but that they actually were beginning to enjoy writing, and reading other people's writing. They were beginning to find that writing was interesting because it was more complex than they thought. It was a complexity, however, which we gave them the language and the forum to approach. An even more interesting things happened on the teacher-course evaluations. In previous quarters, we have typically been "downgraded" for not making assignments specific enough, and for not writing comments which tell them exactly how to correct their mistakes. We improved in both of these--despite the fact that our assignments had actually been more open-ended, and our written comments more descriptive and less directive. We suspect (though we don't know for sure) that they were responding to their own work on the form, not realizing that much of the process was self-initiated.

We hope that our coded responses support our subjective sense that working with pre-conference forms and discussing audience and strategies has made a difference in their ability to self-assess. In any case, we believe we have a teaching tool which may be at least a first step in applying provocative composition research in a useful way in the classroom.